OPINION
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Bare-chested in the park

Why did our ancestors put on clothes? Probably to keep warm. Why should a woman have to wear a shirt on a hot summer day? Because . . . because . . . because the law says so, that's why.

Ramona Santorelli wants to change that. The state law that tells women to cover their chests in public is discriminatory, she says. To challenge the law, she's scheduled a bare-chested picnic at Cobbs Hill Park today in hopes of getting arrested.

Santorelli's no-nonsense attitude has a certain logic. The only difference between a woman's breasts and a man's breasts, she says, is excess tissue — and sometimes, if the truth be told, the excess is on the chest of the man.

But logic is not law. "The purpose of the law was to prevent sexual provocation," explains District Attorney Howard R. Relin, who's not enthusiastic about prosecuting topless women but says he'll do it. (Maximum penalty: $250 or 15 days in jail.)

Provocation? Fewer rapes likely occur on the nude beaches of Europe than on the fully clothed meadows of Cobbs Hill Park. And why, in all justice, should women's comfort be dictated by men's urges?

But logic and justice are one thing; custom is another, and custom dies hard. Women's rights pioneer Susan B. Anthony, cited by Santorelli as a role model for radicalism, would have been appalled at the thought of showing her ankle in public, let alone taking her shirt off.

Susan B. lived in Rochester for 60 years, and probably went on a picnic or two at Cobbs Hill Park. If she were there today, would she complain that Santorelli's protest is too trivial even for comment? Or would she break into a stony smile and say, right on?